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School Improvement / Staff Development: Evaluating Current Plans

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Amendments to perfect the Iowa Student Achievement and Teacher Quality legislation (HF 2549) encourage schools and local districts to evaluate current professional development practices and to consider whether professional development is aligned with district student achievement goals and is focused on research-based instructional strategies. The attached instrument was developed by Dr. Beverly Showers with input from the Iowa Teacher Quality Program Professional Development Stakeholder Group. This instrument is available to assist schools and local districts to conduct a self-evaluation of professional development practices.

In the summer of 2001, the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) published revised standards for staff development, placing improved student learning at the core of quality staff development programs. This change in focus represented a major shift in the organization's focus. For many years the quality of professional development was judged by the satisfaction of participants rather than by the benefit to students.

During the same period, the state of Iowa passed Teacher Quality legislation which included new expectations for professional development in the state, specifically that staff development serve the learning needs of students. With respect to professional development, the Teacher Quality legislation closely follows the NSDC standards for staff development.

Briefly, the NSDC standards fall into three categories: the context, process, and content of staff development, and activities in each of these areas is envisioned to occur concurrently rather than sequentially. Context standards address the culture of the school and school district, including norms for continuous growth and time for collaborative professional learning, administrative leadership, and the alignment of district and school goals for student achievement. The Process standards address the design of staff development—how will student data be analyzed to determine need, which content is most likely to impact the identified need, how will training and follow up be organized and implemented, and how will faculties be structured for the collaborative work of implementing new learning. The Content standards include subject matter content and teaching strategies, equity issues, and family involvement.

The following questions are designed to assist schools and districts to examine current staff development practices and to encourage discussion of ways to bring current practice more in line with state and national standards for quality staff development—staff development focused on the learning needs of students.

For additional information contact: Deb Hansen, Professional Development Consultant for Teacher Quality, Iowa Department of Education, deb.hansen@ed.state.ia.us.

The QIC-Decide tool may be useful to assist districts in using data to address many of the questions suggested in this document.

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1. DATA/GOALS [process standard]

The LEA examined the following data to identify student need and to set priorities for school improvement and staff development.

Describe current LEA practices in writing:

Discussion: How did the LEA (as well as individual schools within the LEA) go about examining their own data? Did they look at data in addition to their ITBS scores? When LEAs/schools studied test scores, did they disaggregate data by gender, SES, ethnic groups, students with disabilities, etc.? Were disaggregated data communicated to and discussed with staff? Were implications of discrepancies in achievement explored? Did the district or its schools collect any additional data to clarify student needs? How confident are you that the LEA's study of its student data identified a real student learning need?

2. FOCUS [context/process/content standards]

The LEA identified the following need(s) for improvement as part of the current CSIP process.

Describe current LEA practices in writing:

Discussion: Is there a single focus or has the school listed multiple subjects/areas they intend to address during the current professional development cycle? Is the focus of school improvement in the area of curriculum and instruction? If no, how would you characterize the focus (e.g., improved climate, school/community relations, etc.)?

3. STAFF DEVELOPMENT [context/process/content standards]

The LEA planned the following staff development to support their school improvement focus.

Describe current LEA practices in writing:

Discussion: How does the planned staff development align with the CSIP focus? For example, if the school's primary concern was literacy and the need to improve student reading and writing skills, is the planned staff development in the areas of reading and writing? How much time is allocated to staff development, and how much of that time is reserved for training (learning of new content)? Is continued follow-up or technical assistance planned to support initial training events? Will whole schools, grade levels, departments, etc., participate in the planned staff development, or is participation voluntary? Are sufficient resources allocated to support in-depth training initiatives?

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4. IMPLEMENTATION [process standard]

Please describe the LEA's plan for implementing the planned change and describe how the planned change will look in classrooms.

Describe current LEA practices in writing:

Discussion: Does the LEA have a clear vision of what students will experience differently as a result of the school improvement/staff development plan? Can the LEA explain how it will know when implementation of the planned change has occurred? How will the district address schools and classes where implementation is lagging?

5. COLLABORATION [process standard]

Please describe the LEA's plan for providing teachers time for collaboration as they work to implement the planned change.

Describe current LEA practices in writing:

Discussion: Is adequate time provided for small groups of teachers to plan and develop lessons, to share their experiences and insights from early trials, to problem-solve difficulties with the implementation, etc.? Is a structure for use of the collaborative time provided to clarify intended use of time?

6. FORMATIVE EVALUATION [process standard]

Please describe the LEA's plan for collecting data that will be used to determine additional training needs, student response to the planned change, and modifications needed in the initiative. (Formative data includes the information gathered on an ongoing basis to provide feedback to teachers about the efficacy of their efforts.)

Describe current LEA practices in writing:

Discussion: Are data collection instruments aligned with the planned change? Is the schedule for collecting data appropriate for the type of change intended? Is there a plan for analyzing the data and providing feedback to teachers and administrators in a timely fashion?

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7. PROGRAM EVALUATION [process/context standards]

Please describe the LEA's program evaluation plan.

Describe current LEA practices in writing:

Discussion: What data will be collected (e.g., pre/post tests, etc.) to determine if the planned change is having the intended effect? How will data be combined with implementation data to determine if student effects varied by implementation? How will data be disaggregated, shared, discussed? How will program evaluation data be used to plan the next cycle of school improvement/staff development? Does your program evaluation plan allow you to examine the cost effectiveness of your professional development program?